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Coping With Technological Overload

Older workers often find technology change and overload a source of stress.

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Another summer has passed; cool crisp days and radiant fall colors will soon be here. The seasonal shift tends to mark the beginning of a busier time. For me, September brings a return to time-consuming commuting, class preparation, student meetings, and long hours spent in committee meetings. As a long time teacher, I like my work. I am prepared for the aforementioned stressors. But I am not as prepared for the mindless array of new on-line forms that replace last year's on-line forms which, in turn, replaced the on-line forms from previous years. When we need to fill out the new forms, we need

hours of new training, training for which one must complete a form, and one that must be scheduled in advance. While this tedium may well be necessary to update and make technical changes, the fast and unfathomable pace of change can result in considerable worker stress. It is incontestable that we need to adapt to ongoing technological developments in the 21st century workplace. My job is no exception. I enjoy teaching, meeting with students, and conducting research. By the same token, a broad range of workers of all ages state that the satisfaction and pleasures associated with the one's job are all too often diminished by countless new procedures many of which are connected to technological [innovation](#).

Studies tell us that as we get older we become more flexible in how we deal with [stressful](#) events. We are less upset by setbacks and can better adapt to change. With age we gain experience and perspective in dealing with stress. We realize that most stressors are manageable and will pass. Of course what is stressful for one person will not be stressful for another. When it comes to managing technology at work, for example, many workers, including older workers, thrive on the technological changes. Unfortunately for a large percentage of older adults technological advancement may also pose a threat to a competent [self-image](#). [Self-efficacy](#) is an important part of one's overall self-image. Self-efficacy is associated with how well we are able to manage potentially stressful everyday activities; it shapes our attitudes about how ability to acquire new skills and competencies. Self-efficacy, in fact, is one the most important factors that affects how we approach the demands of our life. Albert Bandura first wrote about self-efficacy and its impact on our [motivation](#) to tackle new tasks and set new goals. Self-efficacy shapes our sense of perseverance and establishes the perception of our ability. In the contemporary world of work, the constant rate of change can threaten a worker's sense of efficacy, which, in turn may influence job performance and satisfaction.

An essay that appeared in the September 20, 2015 edition of The New York Times article entitled "A Toxic Work World" the author stated that work stress appears to have reached epidemic proportions. According to the author of his article only young, healthy, and wealthy adults are able to thrive with the increasing demands of the work world <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/20/opinion/sunday/a-toxic-work-world.html...> Indeed, a significant number of older adults now work in what appears to be increasingly stressful and hostile employment environments. Workers over 55 make up 22.2 % of the workforce <http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/articles/2014-08-04/a-record-22-dot->

[2-percen...](#) According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there is an increasing number of Americans between the ages of 65 and 69 who find themselves in the labor force. These workers bring skills, experience, expertise, maturity, and [conscientiousness](#) to their jobs. Yet all too often they are perceived as outdated, unable to learn new skills, especially when it comes to keeping up with the fast pace of technological change. Studies have found that the tech field is a “youth” oriented setting in which recruiting younger workers-- “new and recent” college graduates—are given preference over more experienced “older” workers. In the tech world “youth rules” <http://fortune.com/2014/06/19/tech-job-ads-discrimination/>.

Unfortunately this set of attitudes tends to have an impact on the day to day experience of older workers. It is a dangerous outlook that often leads to a more stressful work environment and to increasing age [discrimination](#) which, in turn, threatens health and [happiness](#), reduces job satisfaction, and for older workers may lead to a feeling of isolation and alienation, even withdrawal from the work place.

Stress research has explored daily life stressors as well as major life event stressors. Both of these precipitate stress. Everyone experiences day-to-day stress. Time compression makes it increasingly difficult to accomplish necessary tasks. Recent studies that explore job satisfaction indicate that all too often people of all ages feel “worked to death.” Technology overload is often mentioned as one important area of stress, especially for older workers. Most workers state that there is a continuous need to engage in training and retraining activities to retain their work competence. Is such a requirement a problem for older workers? Aging researchers have long claimed that there is no age limit for learning new skills. Findings also indicate that as one ages it can take longer to learn new skills. As a result older employees who, according to numerous studies, are among the most reliable and hard-working workers often feel stressed by what may appear unreasonable demands of continuous, at times unnecessary, technological change.

In the past I have written about the digital divide and the unequal access to technology. Many older men and women—still working or retired—are quite adept in the use of technology. Even so, managing continuous technological change can lead to frustration and stress. Just as one becomes familiar with the latest gadget, a new one replaces it. For any older workers who have technical expertise in computer technology each day brings new challenges, some of which are satisfying but many of which are stressful. Many technological advances not only complicate the manipulation of a device, they lead to a dependence on an increasing number of Smartphones, computers,

and I-pads—instruments that one needs to master in order to competently accomplish ones work.

Consider what Jacob, a 66-year-old engineer, recently told me. “I have always been able to understanding technology, I had an early computer. I encouraged the use of computers in my place of employment, and I think technology makes life easier, but I am tired, worn down from having to update every gadget constantly.” A 60 year-old teacher recently told me about this issue: “I am a graphic arts teacher. I am skilled and competent in the use of the computer. Recently my personal computer needed replacing. In the process of trying to buy an affordable new one, I was talked down to, made to feel silly about my questions and the financial constraints associated with my purchase. In fact it was such a frustrating experience that I came home feeling badly shaken. I sent my son to buy me the computer. Now I feel even worse about myself for not having spoken up for myself and taken care of the matter. “

In the pool of older adults I’ve interviewed about the stresses and strains of contemporary life, subjects claimed that the ever-changing challenge of technology was one of the top sources of daily-to-day stress both at work and at home. Technological advances often increase the amount of toil in the contemporary workplace. The “pressure” of being technologically competent may be greater for older workers, workers who [fear](#) being the victim of ageism, who fear being perceived as “old” and “outdated.”